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ABSTRACT

The involvement of African American youth in urban violence (nondomestic violence in an urban setting) was studied through a review of literature in the field of psychology. Articles that dealt with African American children and adolescents who have been exposed to or who have experienced this type of violence were selected from journals published by the American Psychological Association (APA) and others. Thirty-seven journals published by the APA were reviewed. Of these, 12 journals had published articles on violence or aggression in the period from 1989 through 1994, with 7 articles specifically addressing African American youth and their involvement in urban violence and 23 articles addressed urban violence in general. A similar search of psychological journals not published by the APA reviewed 148 articles related to African American youth violence, of which 53 were empirical studies. The bulk of studies focused on the individual and were concerned with victims of violence. Relatively few studies moved beyond a focus on the individual. Psychologists must explore (or at least incorporate into their analyses) a study of the environmental conditions and sociopolitical factors that contribute to the problem of youth violence. A bibliography lists the 148 articles reviewed. (Contains 5 tables and 12 references.) (SLD)

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VIOLENCE IN AMERICA: HOW IS THE PROBLEM OF URBAN YOUTH VIOLENCE DEFINED IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL LITERATURE?

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RUNNING HEAD: URBAN YOUTH VIOLENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Violence in urban communities in the U.S. has reached epidemic proportions, and there is an increasing level of societal concern about the problem of youth involvement in this violence. The rates of urban violence began to dramatically increase in the late 1980's and in 1991 Federal crime statistics indicated that the rate of homicide among 15-19 year olds increased by 103% in a five-year period (1985 to 1990), while the murder rate for the entire population rose by only 19% (Stokes, 1991). The problem of youth homicide is most acute among urban youth living in poverty. African-American males and females (ages 15 to 24 years old) are at particular risk, as homicide is the leading cause of death among this group of young people (CDC, 1990). Not only are these youth increasingly becoming victims of homicide, they are also becoming perpetrators, as suggested by the finding that almost all adolescent homicide victims are killed by a same-age peer who have at least an acquaintance relationship with their victim (Christoffel, 1990).

Youth involvement in violence, particularly for African-American youth, has become a national concern, and according to the U.S. Public Health Service, reducing the incidences of violent and abusive behavior among adolescents is one of the priority areas for the health care agenda for the Year 2000 (*Healthy People 2000*, 1990). The Health Service has also recommended an increase in the proportion of elementary and secondary schools that teach nonviolent conflict resolution skills, and an extension of coordinated, comprehensive violence prevention programs. Clearly, a significant amount of national attention is being focused on finding ways to reduce violence among youth.

Psychology has also accepted the challenge of finding ways to better understand youth violence, and in 1991 the APA launched a special commission

whose mandate was to "bring the findings of past and current research to bear on the troubling national problem of violence involving youth" (APA , 1993, pg. 5). The Commission on Violence and Youth was convened by APA's Public Interest Directorate and over a two year period, members engaged in such activities as: meeting in plenary sessions; inviting experts from a variety of disciplines to discuss the issues during open hearings; meeting with children and youth from Washington, DC who described their experiences of living in an atmosphere of violence; establishing a 130 member Cadre of Experts on violence to help shape the Commission's activities; and inviting input from other APA groups working on issues pertinent to violence and youth. At the end of this process, the Commission made recommendations in both the areas of research and policy.

Throughout its history, Psychology has often been charged with the task of investigating important social problems that affect large numbers of individuals in our society. This research has, at times, been detrimental to African Americans because of conclusions that characterized us as "deviant" or "pathological" in some way. For example, during the 1960's psychological research was used to substantiate the belief that African American family life was a "social problem" and that these families were "pathological" because of their structure and low socioeconomic status (Aldous, 1969; Moynihan, 1965). A similar situation occurred with regards to intelligence among African Americans. Since the early 1900's, psychological research has been used to substantiate the belief that African Americans are intellectually inferior to Whites, due to either genetics (Jensen, 1969) or cultural deprivation (Riessman, 1962). In recent years researchers have produced studies which refute these conclusion. Yet, much of the social science literature continues to portray ethnic minorities as being deficient in one way or another, which serves to provide convenient

rationalizations for the perpetuation of racism and the inequities of the socioeconomic system (Sue & Sue, 1990).

Psychology's tendency to promulgate research that supports the status-quo may be due to the way that social problems are defined in the field. Humphreys and Rappaport, in an article published in the *American Psychologist* in 1993, suggest that a social condition is defined as a "social problem" when a particular group engages in the activity of making claims, complaints, or demands for change in a situation that they find repugnant (Humphreys & Rappaport, 1993). This perspective, known as "claims making", emphasizes the subjective, psychological elements of social problems and is a form of interaction where a demand is made by one party to another that something be done about some social condition. These authors also suggest that individuals and groups label a condition as a social problem on the basis of their own motives, interests, and values, and that once this definition has been accepted by the society at large, it serves to dictate the way that the problem is investigated, and the solutions that are proposed to "fix" it. Thus, Psychology, as a claims maker, has joined with others in the society to label youth violence as a social problem, and adds its voice to make demands on the government to find solutions.

Although the labeling of youth violence as a social problem is warranted, in light of the rising homicide rates involving youth and the devastated lives that result from violent interactions among adolescents, there is still some cause for concern with regards to the way in which the problem is being defined, and the approaches that are being taken to "fix" the problem. Social science research has a tendency to adopt a single-focus, one-sided approach to the investigation of social problems, which is problematic because social problems, by their very nature, are dialectics that involve equally valid, but opposing perspectives (Rappaport, 1981). When social scientists become focused on only one

perspective, and fail to take into account the equally compelling opposite point of view, their research findings can unintentionally create negative consequences by inadvertently validating a dominant political ideology that may not in the best interest of those it claims to help.

An example of this dilemma can be seen in the situation that occurred in the 1980's with regards to chronic psychiatric patients in state hospitals. The community mental health movement took the position that it was in the "best interest" of chronic psychiatric patients to be discharged from state hospitals into the community. This decision was viewed at the time as being a more humane response to the abuses that were taking place inside many of these facilities. However, the policy was implemented without paying an equal amount of attention to the fact that there were not adequate resources in the community sector to provide consistent and appropriate care for these patients after discharge. By focusing on only one side of the problem (the deinstitutionalization of chronic psychiatric patients), policy makers and researchers inadvertently harmed these patients in the long run, since the lack of community resources caused many of them to join the ranks of the homeless in major urban areas.

The history of bias and racism that has plagued psychological research with African Americans, coupled with the tendency for social scientists to adopt single-focused, one-sided approaches to the study of social problems have contributed to our concern over the definition of the problem and the nature of the research that is being conducted on youth involvement in urban violence. We are reminded of the truth that is inherent in the familiar story of the blind men who are trying to determine the nature of elephants by touch - the part of an elephant that one grabs onto affects how one understands elephants. Similarly, the way in which one defines a problem determines one's understanding of the

issues involved, which in turn influences the solutions that are proposed to fix the problem. As Rappaport states:

> "...It is as if human problems can only be handled by positivistic convergent science or not at all... [G]iven the nature of social problems there are no permanent solutions and no single 'this is the only answer possible' solutions, even at any moment in time. Divergent, dialectical problems must have many solutions..." (Rappaport, 1981, pg. 9).

Using this perspective to analyze the research on youth involvement in urban violence, we asked the following questions:

(1) How does psychology, as a claims maker, define this social problem?

(2) In what ways does this definition influence research?

(3) What recommendations are being made (as a result of this research) to "fix" the problem?

We have used, as an underlying premise, the assumption that youth involvement in urban violence is a dialectical social problem that many individuals in our society have claimed must be reduced, or stopped. We contend that because of the politically conservative times within which we live, psychologists and other social scientists have turned to explanations favoring the intrapsychic as opposed to environmental conditions (Levine & Levine, 1970). We believe that there is slowly emerging a new kind of conservative intrapsychic and individual responsibility ideology that will blame victims in new and more clever ways, and our aim in this analysis is to determine if such a one-sided approach is being used in the psychological research on urban violence.

METHODOLOGY

For this study we were interested in examining African-American youth involvement with urban violence, which was defined as non-domestic violence that takes place within a community setting. Other terms for urban violence include: community violence; assaultive violence; and interpersonal-assaultive violence. Based upon this definition, we included in our literature review those articles that dealt with African-American youth (children and adolescents) who have been exposed to, or who have experienced this type of violence. Once we established our definition, we undertook an analysis of the literature on urban violence that was published in both APA and non-APA journals between 1989 and 1994 (inclusive).

For the APA journals, we conducted a content analysis of articles on urban violence published during a six-year period, 1989 - 1994. We wanted to find out how much research had been published in the mainstream Psychology journals, and what Psychology's response was to this important social problem. Our original intent was to only conduct a literature review on the articles we found in the APA journals; however, we were forced to include a more extensive review because there was so little in APA. We only found seven articles in APA journals directly related to youth involvement in urban violence through-out this six year period.

FINDINGS

A. Content Analysis of APA Journals

We surveyed **37** journals published by APA, **17** of them were Division journals. Twelve **(12)** out of these 37 journals **(32%)** published articles on violence and/or aggression within the six year period. In these 12 journals,

there were **31 articles** on violence and/or aggression in children/adolescents in the six year period. Of these 31 articles, seven **(7)** articles specifically addressed African-American youth and their involvement in urban violence.

TABLE 1

APA JOURNALS

Number of Journals Surveyed	Number that published articles on violence and/or aggression	Percentages
37 (17 from divisions)	**12**	**32%**

TABLE 2

APA Journals with Articles on Urban Violence

Number of Journals	Number of articles on violence and/or aggression	Number of articles specifically on youth and urban violence
12 (7 from divisions)	**31**	**7**

The other **23** articles on violence and/or aggression found in the APA journals were classified as being "related" to urban violence, since they discussed violence and aggression in general. The articles focused on such topics as: PTSD in children and aggressive behavior in hyperactive boys. Although not directly related to urban violence, we believe that these articles provide helpful information to our understanding of youth involvement in urban violence. We found that these related articles often utilized African-Americans as subjects; however, the articles themselves had a non-contextualized focus. Neither the

ethnicity of the subjects nor the environment within which they lived were incorporated into the interpretation of the data. Rather, the data was presented as though the participants were raceless individuals without context. The following chart provides a break-down of the APA journals and their coverage of urban violence.

[Insert TABLE 3 here]

B. Literature Review - APA and Non-APA Journals

The literature on youth involvement in urban violence was classified into four categories: (1) Discussion of the problem; (2) Discussion of the impact of violence on children/adolescents; (3) Discussion of prevention efforts; and (4) Empirical studies. A total of **148** articles were reviewed. Although this group of articles may not represent an exhaustive review of the literature, we believe that it is a large enough sample for us to determine the various types of articles that are being published on the topic and their content. In this group of published articles, the following percentages were noted:

TABLE 4

CATEGORIES OF ARTICLES ON URBAN VIOLENCE

Category	Total Number	Percentage
Discussion of the Problem	72 (APA=16)	48.6% (APA=10.8%)
Discussion of Impact of Violence	7 (APA=3)	4% (APA=2.0%)
Discussion of Prevention Efforts	16 (APA=0)	10.8% (APA=0%)
Empirical Studies	53 (APA=11)	35.8% (APA=7.4%)

I. Discussion of the Problem of Youth Involvement in Urban Violence

A total of 72 articles were reviewed which discussed the problem of youth involvement in urban violence in a general way. Of this number, one is the APA Task Force Report on Youth and Violence, and 15 articles are published in APA journals. The remaining 56 articles are either published in non-APA journals, as Task Force reports, or in ERIC (which are usually conference papers). This literature draws attention to the large number of children and adolescents, most of whom are ethnic-minority and poor, who are being exposed to urban violence. The authors are concerned with the impact of this exposure to violence on children's development and psychosocial functioning, and most make specific recommendations for intervention and prevention services.

The majority of these studies adopt an intra-individual perspective, or one that is focused exclusively on the victims of violence. The authors are concerned with such factors as negative affects and biological and genetic contributors to violence (Berkowitz, 1990; Dilalla & Gottesman, 1991). Although many of these articles make strong recommendations for collaboration between schools, parents, and the community, it should not be assumed that this represents a change in focus from one that is intra-individual. The collaboration, as presented in these articles, is designed to increase the effectiveness of interventions whose purpose is to somehow change the individual (Wallen, 1993; Barrett, 1992; Felgar, 1992; Gilbert, 1995). The ultimate goal of these efforts is to increase self-esteem, self-control, and/or to improve negotiation skills within the child. In most of these articles, there is no mention of the environmental factors or of the easy availability of weapons which make aggressive interactions potentially lethal for many of these youth.

Also among the group of articles which discuss the problem of urban violence are found those that are concerned with the negative effect of exposure to violence on the lives of children. Most of these authors discuss factors that serve to lessen the impact of violence on youth (Finkelhor & Dzinba-Leatherman, 1994; Garbarino, et al., 1991). In keeping with their intra-individual focus, these articles recommend such strategies as increasing services to young victims, providing mentoring and other supportive services to youth who are at high risk for involvement in violence, and teaching specific skills to children in an effort to make them more resistant to violence.

The review of the articles that discussed the problem of urban violence provides an answer to the first question we posed in this analysis: **How does Psychology, as a claims maker, define the problem of youth violence?** These articles suggest that youth violence is currently being defined in the literature as a problem whose cause may (or may not) be within the individual child, but whose solution is to be found in changing the child.

Few studies critique this intra-individual focus, and those that do highlight the need for increased attention to the economic and sociopolitical systems that are at the root of urban violence (Nelson, 1994; Holton, 1995; Earls, 1991; Elders, 1994; Kaufman, 1994). These authors define the problem of youth violence from a public health perspective, which recognizes the inter-relationship between the individual and the environment within which the "disease" of violence occurs (Rosenberg, 1995; Rosenberg, et al., 1992; Barrett, 1993). According to this model, an individual becomes "infected" with the "disease" when they are exposed to a noxious environment and are unable to avoid contamination. Within this model, the adolescent is considered the "host", the gun or knife that is used to inflict a lethal injury is the "agent", and the conditions

of poverty, hopelessness, and stress in the communities where these youth live are the "environment" that contributes to the spread of the disease.

Although this analogy can only go so far in explaining the problem of youth violence, the public health perspective does define the problem as an interaction between conditions within the individual (intra-individual factors) and conditions within the environment (extra-individual factors). This definition leads to a different way of investigating the problem, and to different solutions. This group of researchers make recommendations that involves more than individual change. They call for increased attention to the social context and environmental conditions that are correlated with violence, as well as addressing the intra-individual factors. The prevention and intervention efforts that they recommend are comprehensive in nature, and are designed to lead to changes within individuals, families, schools and communities in an effort to curtail the spread of the "disease" of violence.

II. Discussion of the Impact of Violence on Youth

A total of 7 articles were reviewed which focus on the impact of urban violence on youth's psychosocial functioning. Only 3 of these articles are published in APA journals. These authors are concerned with the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms in children and adolescents who are either direct or indirect victims of violence. As in the previous group of articles, these reflect an intra-individual focus and the recommendations made are limited to clinical assessment and supportive interventions for victims.

III. Discussion of Prevention Efforts

A total of 16 articles were reviewed which discussed violence prevention. Of these, none are published in APA journals. A majority of the articles call for a

comprehensive approach to violence prevention that is designed to facilitate changes in individuals, schools and communities (Bell, 1987; Chavis, 1995; Emery, 1993). However, in half of these articles, the discussion is limited to the intra-individual perspective, and recommendations are made for programs that increase resilience in at-risk youth, with no mention of the other environmental and sociopolitical factors that contribute to the problem (Greene, 1993; Perry, 1993; Steinberg, 1993; White, 1995).

IV. Empirical Studies

A total of 53 empirical studies were reviewed. Of this number, 11 are published in APA journals; the remaining 42 articles are published in either non-APA journals (n=37), Task Force Reports (n=2) and in ERIC (n=3). In order to answer the second and third questions in our study, we conducted a more comprehensive analysis of the approaches being used in the empirical research. The empirical studies were categorized into the following content areas: (1) prevalence surveys; (2) correlations between exposure to violence and development of psychological symptoms; (3) examination of psychological processes within violent and high/risk youth; (4) case studies of violent/aggressive youth; (5) longitudinal studies; (6) program evaluations; and (7) studies that use a public health model.

[Insert TABLE 5 here]

Approximately 26.4% of the empirical studies reviewed are concerned with establishing prevalence rates for urban youth (children and adolescents) exposure to violence. These studies have been conducted with large samples of

youth who are usually African-American, and survey measures have been used to establish the rates of exposure to violence and victimization.

Studies concerned with identifying the correlations between exposure to violence and the development of psychological symptoms represent approximately 22.6% of the empirical literature. Researchers have found that exposure to violence has a negative impact on children, with victimization (either directly or indirectly) being associated with such problems as the development of PTSD symptoms; developmental delays, cognitive difficulties; depression; and behavioral problems.

A substantial number of the empirical studies (30.2%) examine the psychological processes within violent and/or high risk youth, and explore such processes as cognitions (attributions; social cognitive processes); moral reasoning and values; anger management; the connection between anger, depression, and violence; prior adjustment; and assessments of risk for repetitive victimization.

The empirical literature also contains two case studies and two longitudinal studies; however, these represent only 7.4% of these studies. There are also a few studies (9.4%) that are evaluations of specific violence prevention programs, and two studies (3.7%) that reflect a public health model in their definition of the problem and the research design.

The second and third questions considered in this analysis (which are: In what ways does the definition of the problem influence research; and What recommendations are being made, based on this research, to "fix" the problem?) can be answered from a review of the empirical research. In a majority of the studies, the intra-individual definition of youth violence has led to research that focuses on the victims - either the number of youth who have been exposed to violence; the impact that violence has had on their functioning; and/or the psychological processes that go on inside the individual that either contributes

to, or inhibits, his/her involvement in violence. As can be seen from this summary, over 80% of the empirical studies reviewed (82.9%) focus on the individual and are concerned with the victims of violence. The conclusions drawn by these researchers reflect this orientation, and they make such recommendations as increasing services to victims; providing early intervention and/or detection of problems in order to mitigate the negative effects of violence; and helping young people develop skills that enhance their social cognitive functioning and anger management.

The longitudinal studies and those which utilize a public health model in their conceptualization of the problem do move beyond this individual focus, since they are concerned with the inter-relationship between individuals, environmental conditions, and the social context within which the individual functions. However, these four studies represent only 13.1% of the existing empirical research literature.

By presenting this critique of the intra-individual focus of much of the empirical research on youth violence, we are not suggesting that there is no validity in this approach. It is very important that we understand more about youth who are victimized by violence, or who are at high-risk for victimization. This is similar to immunizing children against infectious diseases - it helps reduce the incidence of illness, and in the long run, saves lives. But, maintaining a sole focus on intra-individual conceptualizations of the problem is clearly not enough. Psychologists must also explore, or at least incorporate into their analyses, the environmental conditions and sociopolitical factors that contribute to the problem of youth violence.

The expansion of the research focus that we feel is necessary is in keeping with the recommendations put forth by the APA Commission on Youth and Violence. Specifically, the Commission recommended the following:

- Research to identify effective intervention programs that address the continuum of prevention, early intervention, treatment, and rehabilitation
- Expansion of basic research efforts
- Recognition of the complex influence of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences in all research
- Improved data collection and analysis
- New and improved measurement and instrumentation
- Consideration of key issues in the review, funding, and dissemination of research

Although the Commission does not make a specific recommendation that research on youth violence should be approached from different perspectives, it does seem to be suggesting that research efforts need to be expanded and that they should recognize the cultural and social context of the subjects. These recommendations are consistent with our review of the literature, but fall short of an explicit critique of the intra-individual definition of the problem and the single-focused perspective that has been utilized in most of the psychological research to date. If psychological research is to adopt a more public health perspective, it will need to move away from a sole focus on the individual, and adopt approaches to research that are much broader.

It has been suggested by Rappaport and others that problems arise when social scientists adopt a single-focus approach to complex, dialectical social problems, and in the case of youth involvement in urban violence, the victim-focused approach that has been taken in most of this empirical literature contributes to the public perception that youth involvement in urban violence is a unique problem for African Americans in general, and for young Black males in particular. The conclusions from this body of research have led to prevention

efforts that are designed to facilitate changes in violent and high-risk African American youth, with little or no attention being given to changing the economic and social conditions in these young people's lives.

As psychologists, it is important that we remain mindful of the power that is inherent in our research, and become more consciously aware of the theoretical and philosophical perspectives we take in empirical investigations of complex social problems. As suggested by Rappaport (1991), prevention programs aimed at so called high-risk populations, especially programs under the auspices of established social institutions, can easily become a new arena for colonialization, where people are forced to consume our goods and services, thereby providing us with jobs and money. To avoid such a scenario, it is incumbent upon all of us who conduct research on the topic of youth violence to avoid designing studies and producing results that are de-contextualized and that do not incorporate an awareness of the multiple environmental, social and political factors surrounding urban violence. We must do more than just provide data that can be used to validate prevention efforts that do little more than try to convince youth that if they "just say no" to violence or if they learn better negotiation skills, they will be able to protect themselves and avoid violent encounters. Our research efforts will be of little help to the youth who live in these communities if we simply ignore the noxious environments within which many African Americans live, and if we do not recognize that for many of these young people, violent incidents occur with little warning, and it may not be possible for them to avoid an interpersonal conflict given the context.

We must investigate the social problem of urban violence as we would any other paradoxical dilemma, and utilize broadly conceptualized approaches in our studies. Our ultimate goal should be to produce results that will facilitate the empowerment of young people who are living in violent communities and

their families so they can ultimately have more control over their lives. To accomplish this task, our studies need to involve a real collaboration with our research subjects which will not only facilitate our ability to conduct the research, but which will also help us design the type of studies that can provide information that is relevant to the everyday lives of those we are attempting to help.

TABLE 3

APA JOURNALS & URBAN VIOLENCE

APA Journals with Articles on Urban Violence or related constructs.	**APA Journals with articles on violence and/or urban teens helpful to understanding youth involvement in violence.**	**APA Journals with no articles on urban violence or violence in general.**
Developmental Psychology (**Two** - 1992 & 1994)	Journal of Family Psychology (**One** - 1994)	Journal of Abnormal Psychology
American Psychologist (**Two** - 1991 & 1993)	Professional Psychology: Research & Practice (**One** - 1990 & 1991)	Journal of Applied Psychology
Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology (**One** - 1993)	Psychological Bulletin (**Three** - 1989, 1991, 1993)	Behavioral Neuroscience
Psychological Assessment (**One** - 1991)	American Psychologist (**Eight** spread through-out the 6 years)	Journal of Comparative Psychology.
Law & Human Behavior (**One** - 1990)	Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology (**Five** - 1989, 1991 & 1994)	Journal of Educational Psychology
	American Journal of Community Psychology (**Two** - 1991 & 1992)	Health Psychology
	Humanistic Psychologist (**Two** - 1989)	JEP: Animal Behavior Processes
	Psychotherapy (**One** - 1991)	JEP: General
	Teaching of Psychology (**One** - 1990)	JEP: Human Perception & Performance
		JEP: Learning, Memory & Cognition
		Neuropsychology
		Journal of Personality & Social Psychology
		Psychological Review
		Psychology and Aging
		Journal of Social Issues
		Educational Psychology

		School Psychology Quarterly
		The Counseling Psychologist
		Military Psychology
		Rehabilitation Psychology
		Journal of Consumer Psychology
		Psychology of Women Quarterly
		Psychoanalytic Psychology
		Psychology of Addictive Behavior
		Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin

TABLE 5

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Content	Number	Percentage
Prevalence surveys	14	26.4%
Correlations between exposure to violence and development of psychological symptoms	12	22.6%
Examination of psychological processes within violent and high/risk youth	16	30.2%
Case studies of violent/aggressive youth	2	3.7%
Longitudinal studies	2	3.7%
Program evaluations	5	9.4%
Studies that use a public health model	2	3.7%
TOTAL	53	

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